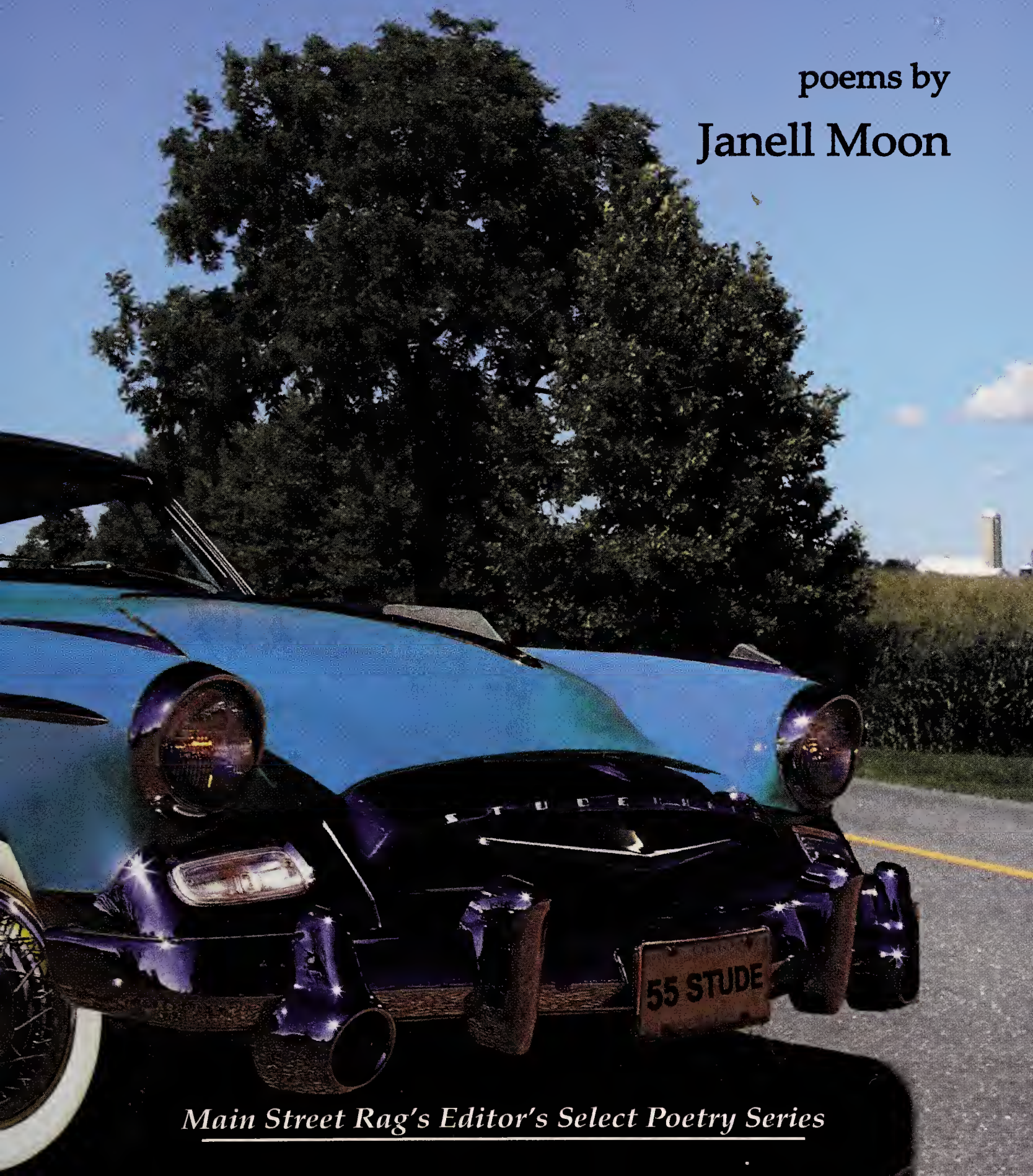


RIDING FREE

IN A

BLUE STUDEBAKER

poems by
Janell Moon



Main Street Rag's Editor's Select Poetry Series

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IN A

BLUE STUDEBAKER

To Aunice -

Best in compensation -

Janell
poems by

Janell Moon

Main Street Rag Publishing Company
Charlotte, North Carolina

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The poems contained within may have happened, were likely to happen, could have happened, felt like they happened, should have happened, or did happen. Even fiction is true.

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To Sherrill Crawford

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I

Howling

If there were a howling
would it be you, mother
I hear you throughout the night
I creep out of the lace curtains
through the closed windows
wander the verandah that curls the house
take trays of salmon, my smoked heart

the cat won't let me touch her
hisses and moves away, stretches her fine back
chases the ringlets of sun on the flowered floor
carpets you laid down
I could have died for you
those years of ducking
the slap of your emeralded hand

I stayed in, wanting out
checking exits, opening the shutters
cut holes in the side of the house
but when I heard the click, click, clicking
of your high heels coming home
I helped you out of buttons and zippers
tiny golden latches, silver snaps
cold-creamed your face

how I raged at you,
the first woman I ever loved
couldn't be there, couldn't leave you
me, under the bed searching for bread
flinging my body at your locked door.

Photophobic

Daylight hurts my eyes but through
my dark glasses, I distinguish
open doorways and tiny rooms, some color,
more a sense of density.

I register people in different weights
depending on the nature of their heart
or the level of their fear.

The murmur of voices help.

The splash of water thinner than a mirror, glass less
than a tree, tree less than steel. I can see.

Vocabulary becomes a turnabout. A bridge,
not a road over water, but thick over thinness.

You ask me why I liked your grandmother,
and it's because she was light like rain
but had tree not stone in her.

I'm White

I'm white.

I have no ethnic background.

My momma doesn't know her name.

I have a grandma who lives in a musty house full
of hidden places, back staircases.

I peek around but never find a clue.

I have another grandma who checks
my underwear drawer for soiled panties.

She sells corsets at the department store.

Her daddy and her husband daddy left her.

She never says a thing.

We live alone in a single family house on a dead end street.

We can make all the noise we want.

There is no one near enough to hear,
no one at our front or sides.

We screen the doors and windows
to keep bugs out but we don't lock
our doors. We feel safe as we are.

The map shows us where other kinds of people live.

They live in grassy houses. They wear few clothes.

The song says in southern France, they wear no pants.

They teach us in school to order food in French
but never tell us where the restaurants are.

We eat at home.

We are careful.

Daddy got promoted, got a big office,
away from the laboratory,
the experiment and searching.

He did it for money.

He did it for the family.

He did it because they asked.

He grits his teeth every night,
scares me awake with swearing.

The news names people, not us.
We eat hamburger, mashed potatoes,
canned vegetable, and jello for dessert.

My best friend is Hannah Brey and
her mom makes me special sausage,
sauerkraut. I gag from so much flavor.
I make mealtime excuses, feel sad to stay away.

I like her mom.

We give to the United Way, PTA and dimes for crippled children.
We don't hang wash out on Sunday
or go out to play before 10 a.m.
We give our seats to the elderly and look away
if you're having a bad day. We return phone calls,
tell little white lies to protect your feelings
when we don't want to go. We trust family men to be our bankers,
our insurance agents, our dentists.

We let whole populations and what is happening
to them drift out of our consciousness, out of our way.
We forget about women.
We think mothers are not people.
We forget about ourselves. I am raised nice. I do the best I can.
I'm always looking for hints of the truth.
I never know what to do with my anger.
I'm never quite sure what I'm angry about.

Braiding

My grandma made corsets for the stars:
Loretta Young, Bette, Joan,
even little Judy Garland.
She held the cloth tape in her hand,
the pins in her mouth, could inch around
their bodies, hide any fat.
After work when she felt idle,
she'd go through our underwear drawer,
look for stains and worn out elastics.

My mother stayed downstairs,
Gloves protecting her hands
until she'd slip on rubies, sapphires, diamonds.
The catalogues would show
her fair tapered fingers
resting on black velvet.
Perhaps a gay matching ribbon.
(I did the dishes.)

The regular money came from my sister
at the dry cleaner's
driving the cleaning van around town
returning mix-ups, rhinestones sewn
where once were wooden buttons.
White sweaters to women who would never
wear red. My sister would flutter and fluff
and make this little clucking sound
the customers took for sympathy.

I'd be at the dining room table writing
the ringlets of my family. How I loved
combing through their lives, smelling
the taffy they tasted.

They were proud of me, their writer,
until I published stories of people
who sounded like them, only crazy.
They said I saw the henna
reddening the neck
never the shine of auburn.
I saw love as a tangled nest,
swamp grass with coin and feather,
love braided with fire.

Something Wrong

In bed next to my sister,
I breathe the air from a dark Ohio place,
a night of no stars, moon behind the clouds,

put one hand on my stomach,
a cavity holding the pounding,
a heart that lies too close to the rib cage,

a hurt with each breath I try to swallow,
the throat call of longing,
fingering my way to comfort

on the satin edge of the blue blanket–
wishing my sister would let me hold her hand,
open-palmed, I beg her, “Please,”

and she says, “No, leave me be,” and I keep at her
with promises of play–I’ll make up a game
and her face slowly turns toward fun–

and this, I show her, a soft pink heel to heel,
wiggly toe to toe, a petal pump, a bicycle ride
but she is on to me,

keeps her flannel nighty tucked
between her legs, nothing for me to see.
She stops, flounces over on her back

and I am so ashamed to want a peek.
I turn my round flaming cheeks away,
her so smart to catch and hold me off.

Next door, my father, one drink too many,
goes to the room that holds my mother,
her, with a chair against the door,

we hear the push, the grunt, the "Hey,"
before the door opens
with a, "Shhh, you'll wake the girls."

Sleep comes restless and I dream
my sister and I are hanging on the line
out back in the sun to dry and

she is my favorite striped shorts
and I am a navy sailor shirt—
we look so good—

but I see we are bleached out
by too much sun and we are skin
with no bones;

I wake up, the bedcovers ripped—
mattress torn loose from the moving bed.
I am pushed against the wall,

hanging on the edge of boxes
hidden under the bed
full of winter woolens—

mittens, leggings, itchy jackets
and she is sleeping neatly on her side
to the left of the imaginary line her finger traced

to bind me before the hang, the night toss.
I am surprised to wake to my life,
one more night survived, more or less.

Soft Cotton

I loved my baby brother.
I would let him follow me
everywhere. I liked the
sight of him, his curly hair.

I meant to keep him safe.
He told me I was his blue blanket.
He was warmer when I was near.
He felt me through the painted wall.

Now my brother sits on a worn out mattress
picking at the buttons. He shivers.
I ask the attendant to give him a blanket
but he puts his fingers around his neck
showing me a hanging.

My brother's swollen hand comes
toward me reaching for my jacket.
I want to lie with him in soft cotton.

Doctor Dog

Doctor's not a daddy man
even though he's a boy like daddy.
He shrugs his shoulders and gets annoyed
if I ask about something.
This one thinks he knows what I should do.

He writes down on his paper pad,
medicine for me, makes my mouth dry,
my head fog up, go in circles,
wants me to slow down
so Momma can cope.

Please doctor, what can I do?
I never liked the doctor man,
pretend I don't understand
girls are to bow in his presence.
I never call him sir.

I whisper names like scum bum
and dirty dog, want to give him pills,
fight him for his needle and
give him a shot in the butt
so he relaxes more,

mellow him out a bit
no need for him to run about or
feel, or think or talk, want him silent,
make it easy on me,
get in no-one's way.

He'd be good and quiet now
and keep his harping and barking down.
I'm happy to treat Doctor Dog kindly.
I'll clean his water every day.
I'll call him good boy, good doggie

goody, goody, good.
my little Doctor Zombie Dog
helps me have a pleasant day.
I like it when things go my way.

Penniless Child

He asks for all I have, forces me to give it.
I never again like the smell of basement rooms,
damp and musty, wet foundations, hidden clothes.
Even when it's cool down there, hot summer nights,
it stinks.

I hate dark-haired men with shiny teeth named Charles.
I recognize their scent.

My Momma calls him Mr. Stetzel. Daddy calls
him drunk. My sister doesn't discuss him
at all. We never talk in the same room
about the same thing. I never tell the right thing
to the right person.

I take to liking attics where it's hot and dry,
a place I can sort through quiet pages of a scrapbook.
Chose what pictures to take out, put in, where
to look. Try to save up for myself, a childhood.

Small Town Summer

It wasn't the heat
that made us take off
late one night after sitting
out on the screened porch,
my friends and I cooling
ourselves by dropping
ice cubes down the front of
our dresses. Too much has
been made of heat and its ability
to force a person. It was
that time kept unwinding with no place
to go but to the next day, the movie house
changing once a month, the teen center
not opened yet, drag racing down
Main Street stopped by the mother's group.
I got some money and the five of us
took off in the blue Studebaker
looking for life beyond
the ticking of fireflies and sweat.
We drove from Youngstown to Pittsburgh,
slept the night hot in the parking
lot of the Holiday Inn. The next morning
a helicopter spotted my father's car
when we were still sleeping and escorted
us home. Betsy's father was the angriest; she'd told him
she'd be right back with chocolate ice cream.

Stain

Too shy to be pretty, eyes down,
shoulders slumped, now radiant
in a picture on the front page
of the Akron Beacon Journal,
killed by a young man we know
from high school, a boy we didn't much notice.
We hitchhiked the hour home from Kent State
whenever we wanted as she did
the day he picked her up,
took her to his basement—
chloroform, rope, a camera waiting for her.

It was just before spring break,
mother insisted on picking me up
from school that year,
cars curving around the central mall,
the grass leaning toward summer.
I was her captive in our Ford
as she sped the winding road of Ohio
cautioning me about books and their covers,
can't tell a nice boy from a boogie man.
She said that crazy didn't always show,
making me wonder which one of us was crazy,

this woman warning me, not mentioning
the years in her kitchen, her slap on my face,
or me, so filled with anger,
the smell of violence between us.

The Dragon Doesn't Live Here Anymore

I wanted to be held like my brother,
feel all the extra love my parents gave him,
the tender hopes for him
to caress my shoulder, take some
silver berries for me. I wanted to hate
him but he was just a dark-eyed child
who looked like I did when I was a tot,
almond eyes, full cheeks. His nose crinkled
when he smiled. The look in his eyes
was different, the startled stare of someone
who had too many nightmares, nightmares
that sometimes came in the day.

Older sister, I clawed my way to success and early arthritis,
forcing life to happen by pounding at doors.

Now a middle-age man, he lives in Kentucky's projects
on SSI and his dreams.

Schizophrenic, manic depressive.

His new psychiatrist changed his diagnosis

last month. Called my brother in

for a special appointment and asked him to sit down

because this may be alarming

but he was schizoid. Less curable.

My brother asked for bus fare home.

Baby Dyke

I sat quiet on the edge of my friends

the girls I couldn't speak to
trying to get inside their heads
make sense of their need of young men
understand their love of boys
oh, how they loved those firm hairy chests
those bodies that tried for sex every chance they got

never understood the thrill of yelling out car windows
drinking beer together, talking sports
their bathing suits, tiny checkered squares

I'd move my head from mouth to mouth, listening
girl to girl, boy to boy girl boy
sister brother
trying to get a clue
who I was in this
wasn't a girl like that
wasn't a boy like them
wasn't like my brother
wasn't my sister

discarded the name tags they gave me
girl friend lover
pretty, cute, peppy, pet, tiger, peaches
made me swear, anger rocked my stomach

steel-jawed I held my silence
in that Ohio town
in that American state
in this U.S. country
couldn't find a people
couldn't find a home.

Beyond Midnight

Every Friday I borrowed the family car
yanked my school dress
over my head, adjusted the straps
of my full black slip,
put on black pumps hidden in the trunk,
crossed the bridge to the Troubadour.

I'd slide through the door
with a five dollar bill,
land on the sound of saxophone and bass,
my hair up in a French twist,
my eyes young. I'd smoke cigarettes, watch
men in platform shoes dance together,
their furs on the back of blue velvet,
ladies in restrooms of mirrors and orchids
paint each others' nails.

I'd take the pins out of my hair,
move to the rhythm, the flickering lights
making triangles on the floor.
I was part of the geometry, the sprays
of light. I'd scoop water from the center
fountain, let it trickle down my steaming skin.

I'd drive the night back just this side of midnight,
realize I'd have to go many miles from home
to live my kind of love, a love that turned night into day.

Strawberry Markings

Together for the first time
I lift the blue baby blanket
my eyes follow your delicate bones
go over your skin
stomach wrinkled above your round pouch
genitals I examine
your hip line, fine legs
each toe I count.

I am the inspector.
Flip you over on your back
hold your falling head
careful not to disturb
the black sore, the source of life
check your bottom, straight spine.
On the backs of your legs, two tiny spots.
I run my fingers over the birthmarks.
This is not the last time
I'll see a flaw and touch it.

This poem is to you.
I wish it had been this way.
I wish I could have loved your body right away.
I wish I hadn't been afraid
to touch you but I wasn't in love
wasn't using my body for love.
I was repelled by sex with a man
afraid of what my body would give
from such a shudder
first a miscarriage, then a stillborn
all that blood, now you come
full of cries, reaching for me.

My Baby

He screams and cries and cries.

He whimpers.

He whines.

He startles.

He wiggles free of zippers, buttons, elastic.

He rubs his eyes, pinches her mouth, puckers.

He sags in my arms, flops down.

He lets go a squeak, a burp, a yawn.

His chest heaves.

He wet drools.

He makes a warm place on me, skin to skin.

He nods off. He falls over the edge.

He's asleep.

He's tired.

It's his first week on the job.

Ether

I am in pain lying on a stretcher
in the recovery room
women moaning everywhere around me
my first baby delivered prematurely
I wake up screaming
I changed my mind
didn't want to have a baby
didn't want the pain.
The nurse's aide wheels my bed
to the far end of the darkened room
so I don't upset the others
(seems to me they're already upset)
tells me to hush up, girl, he's come.
It's been done.

Years later after I had my tubes tied,
the same thing. Only this time I don't
feel guilty, think it must be the ether
that confuses time, misplaces pain.
I just scream and throw up on everyone,
vomit in my hair.

My son asks me to tell him his birthing
story. I tell him he was in such a hurry
to get here, he came fast and early.
Us so glad to see him.

But I think to myself just imagine
what I might have done
if he had been full-term.

Child In Mind

I tried not to spoil him
answer only every third question
give in to every third request.
He was an only child.

He was very small then
very busy building towns, cities really
places for me to clap over
and clap I did. Stamp even.
I wanted him proud.

The teachers at Happy Tiny Tots
let him come to play school
dressed in his pajama top
hair uncombed
this was a boy in a hurry
pot holders to make with unwoven sections
big holes for fingers to slip through.
Even so, he liked the colors and the giving.

At night, he'd beg to hear stories
of the monkey and the man in the yellow hat
when I was tired, he'd pat me
say he'd sing me to sleep
start with a little hum noise
then his head would start nodding
snoozing, leaving me to tuck his feet in.

But what I remember most about my mothering days
was the warm place he left on my skin every day
after I hugged him even today you can find
soft places where my skin sags in from those sweet holdings.

How he scanned the room for me his safety, before
he wandered off how my life revolved around him
so many years now he says he's growing out
of being a momma's boy well.

Woman With A Cleaver

This room I know, the crack
down the pale blue paint, a razor line,
holds the tale of your anger
the midnight I tell you I don't want to stay—

it's too confining for me here,
the windows see no sky—
only the laundry hanging from the line—
red underwear, Long Johns, we called them
when I was young peeking on back lines
on Monday afternoons, our mother's washday,
for a hint of bodies and sex—

nothing stays the same, the rules all change,
don't want to touch you please,

even the cat comes uninvited
through the open window,
sits on me, my sadness.
I want no one to watch me,
push away purr and need,
don't want to be nice anymore,

want water, air, and desert jeeps, open empty spaces,
want you to let me be...

can't stay in this room,
I'm tired of how to do things right—
clean the fish, get rid of the jaw, the eye,
a chop, chop, chop.

A wipe away, see how good I do—
don't care, just can't stay here,
dry blood stains the cold slabbed ice,

can't hear their cries—their mouths gone.

Solid Things

Fifteen years in shattered sheets,
finally I tore my body from a lie
I could finger.

I wouldn't say my husband didn't have passion—
that wouldn't be my business
or my truth.

I left because my passion
was covered with the heel of America's secrets,
locked chests holding unspoken lives.

My child watched to see how crazy I'd get,
wanted away to his father's house
where people were watching television
not knocking cobwebs from corners.

I thought my friend said she had canaries in her mind
but she said like canaries in the mine
we both married before anyone
talked about a woman being gay.

I think of my brother with angel sickness
and understand canaries better
but love Van Gogh for taking music lessons
to help his yellows sing.

We all exist the way we exist.
Love comes in nouns, the solid things
I can name and touch.
My son. This bowl. This woman.

Repeating Itself

My grandmother beat the rugs out in the backyard.
It was her favorite part of spring cleaning,
those flowered rugs, that beating broom.
My mother followed her love of beating,
took to hitting the ceiling cobwebs
most Fridays, on hot afternoons.
Dust and moving things, her enemy.

When those two women sat down it was to watch
that you were eating all that they fixed,
or to get the needles out, darn your socks,
knit you up a quick sweater. They would fight
over the rocking chair, liked to sleep upright,
eat breakfast set out on the table the night before.
Doorways were a problem. Who'd go first?
Husbands left for cities far away.

When love comes into my life, I choose a woman
who wants me to obey; she'll set the menus,
deal the deck. I dream an opossum comes
to tell me I'm hanging upside down.
Then my mother comes with her broom,
bats me down. My grandmother hands me a shovel,
tells me to start digging. Water fills the hole,
I dive in and come up with a broom. It's very heavy.
Very wet. I set out to sweep in circles.

Science Class

Father stood at the toilet making waterfalls.
I changed my brother's diapers
noting a round knot that could turn
into a tiny hose. Once he spit up
and peed at the same time wetting my glasses
just as the noon whistle went off.
My mother stood in the kitchen heating food.

When I had the flu the school nurse made me
lie down on a cot, told me boys made girls
have babies up a sacred hole. I was feverish
praying for my mother to come.

Later the science teacher had a special
meeting with the sixth grade girls.
She wanted to show us a film about a train wreck.
It turned out to be cartoon characters menstruating,
dropping eggs between their legs.
We were to wear pads to catch them.
I wished I could stay home more.

I learned to hide my ballooning breasts
behind sweater twin sets, later married a man who was quick.

When love finally finds me, it's a summer midnight,
the moon full of tiny souls breaking off
to form stars. She lies shining in my arms, spinning.
The night sky didn't prepare me for this;
how could I be prepared?

Found Poem

after a KQED broadcast

"Help me, help me. He's gonna kill me.
I know he's gonna kill me.
Help, help me, quick. He's at me again.
Ohhh..."

"Bitch. What are you doing? Get off that phone."

"Hello. What's wrong? Who's that in the
background? Hello. Answer me."

"Never mind. I'm sorry I called. I shouldn't have called."

"Ma'am, where are you? What's your name? Who's with you?"

"It's just me throwing a fit. I shouldn't have called.
Please, please. I shouldn't have called."

"Ma'am, we don't want you to get hurt. Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. I'm just throwing a tantrum.
Don't come, okay? Everything's fine."

"We've traced the call. We know where you are. If you don't
want us to come, say a number between 1 and 5."

"Six."

Shadows

I am afraid of what she is afraid of

she warns me she'll want sex
schedule it to suit her
make me cook for her
the way she likes it
take the fish and throw it back
storm around, make rain

guess she hasn't smelled
the swamp mud on me
lightning in my fingertips
thunder in my chest
puddle splasher. people eater
serve up broken glass

she tells me she's difficult
I think witches, flying bats, good match.

The World's Edge

The egrets stands on webbed feet
lift first one, then weigh the other
finding balance in the grasses of this muddy flatland.
They live with me, these birds
keep me company.

The smell here takes getting used to
all swamp and wet
We're on the edge of land and sea
nowhere else to go.

My neighbors hardly talk
wear old straw hats low
avoid the noon sun and each other.

We live in shacks
peeling paint in
yellows, blues, some reds
hatted by tin roofs
our walls lined with thick plastic
so the rain won't get in.

The long boardwalk
holds us above the tide and mud
so we can rest here at the creek's edge.

On Saturday mornings
men repair the wooden boardwalk
from the pounding tide
so they can walk the night back
down the long wet planks.

At the end of the day
women who don't cook
spread their meals on crackers
hang brown trousers on the back of chairs
near the heater's warmth.

When the tide is in, I sleep with water underneath me
it soothes me, a rowing
rain hits this little roof
a ping, pinging
wind catches the four sides
in one breath, a rock, rocking

dream of digging eighty feet
through the mud to make a basement
find the core of life, make honey.

Reunion

When was it that my pointed bras and platform shoes
turned to spreading feet and flannels?
I wonder if I'll ever flirt again,
notice lines in my face, sunk-in places I never imagined.
Could I wear size 12 again?
Forget size 6.

It took my mother twenty years
after the divorce to find her smile
and every time she does,
I love those happy teeth.
This winter, the slightest wind bothered her;
she seemed shorter.
It was the season I finally got a better job,
joined a gym while she learned to garden in a window box.

Sometimes there's a long gap between the question and answer.
Years of separation and I'm more like her than ever.
We have no patience for unasked advice: how to eat, how to
beat the market, arch lifts and feet behaviors.

Time. It kisses us with eyes that say,
don't want any other mother, any different daughter.

I'm A Lesbian With A Crush On John Travolta

I thought maybe John was gay. That made me happy.
Then I saw him on the cover of People magazine,
his wife and all.

I'm not bisexual. Liking John makes me feel
like I'm wearing someone else's jacket
and I've reached in the pockets,
found ticket stubs to plays I've never seen,
receipts for clothes I've never purchased,
and a rope of red licorice.
The flavor I hate.

Rapture

There is a crack in the stone wall surrounding us,
our life has signs of use and many launderings.

This is the end.

Something must be sacrificed before we can start again.

If you ask me to, I'll wear your underwear,
prance the night in your shoes, shave myself raw.

I'll cut your hair, tattoo your ear,
stain your neck with snake tails.

Caress you with enough nakedness to confront
the hunger of my changing.

Don't talk. Stitches will enter your mouth
unless you are silent. Indelicate or not, it must be so.

How long has it been since we made love
in the light of day, rolled

on the side of hills, had sex in grass.

There is so much yet I want to do beyond forbidden windows.

What kind of shelter is this that we say shelters us.

I want to trespass your love map,

braid the budding secrets

of springtime with late summer's scream,

want to touch you with the earth of my body,

undress the polished staircase of our lives.

III

Freedom

I am flesh and bone with trouble.

Weighted down, sunk to the ground.

Weighted down, I follow the crow that circles my trouble,
around and around. I get up, circle my trouble.

Get, up, walk outside of the circle of my trouble.

Get up and walk outside.

I walk outside.

Friendly Strangers

His last words to me, God bless you,
when I sneezed from the air conditioning
breezing at my back the night I kept vigil.
With that, my friend left his sightless eyes,
turned to death, the smell of heaven.
It's strange to watch the young die
as I age, my next door
neighbor's meals put in my mailbox
to deliver when he's too weak to answer
his bell. The upstairs tenant's midnight calls
asking for light, his mind gone before the
twig of his body. Why do I, a woman,
live among these men? Oh, how I wish for
the grass-mowed days when the children
of our neighborhood climbed
the sweet rock of towering hillsides.
Where are their mothers?
What would I do if my son died?
I fold my hands, make temples to some god,
an outsider who helps but doesn't join.

Night's Holding

When my son was young and sick
to his stomach, he'd throw
up on me. I told him to run
to the toilet but no,
out of control, he wanted his mother.
Now grown, he sometimes comes
knocking at my door to tell
me it hurts to be awake,
his girlfriend left him,
afraid he'll lose his job.

He stands over the fan,
the cool air climbing his trousers
while I make a simple dinner
of potatoes and sausage and alligator
pears. I know there's nothing
I can fix and I don't try.
Maybe after dinner he'll want
to walk with me and we'll see
every detail: fat tomatoes, tall
vines of beans, wild
yams thrusting themselves against
the wire fences for protection
from the raccoons. By the time
we turn home, it'll be cooler,
everything clothed in silhouette.

Resilience

Love wanders to my body as a sick woman and a tiny boy, and in this haze of love with all its troubles and wild and breezy joys, I hear laughter turn to coughing, her lungs scarred and full of choking-illness a flute with magical power where hope dances to no predictable step. I have been surprised before by loved ones dying out of order and wake in the middle of the night to turn to the window of prayer but the cries of the peacock over the valley break any peace.

When my thin skin bleeds, my grandson stops—blood is important to him—deserving of a frown and a long questioning look before he resumes building his towers of colors. When I tell him he can't throw toys at the window he cries, Ouch, Ouch, OUCH, as I place him gently on his "time out" rug. Listening to his pleas, the poetry of longing sits here on the rug before me in all its bellowing.

I know that we are hardy but delicate, each little thing on earth is delicate, and we are visitors; at each earth rotation there is a chance. My lover says, Don't be so fragile, but she and he and I, are fragile.

What We Can Do

I opened the door to the garage, gingerly
turned on the light, my eyes flying
to the rafters. I knew I'd see
the rope hanging and the jump
would have been positioned
from the washing machine.
Such a thin rope, I thought, as I pulled
a chair over and cut it down.
White nylon. Tight knots over strong wood.
How did she know how?
Did she climb up the side of the washing machine
even though she hadn't been active for years?
I kept my mind on her young adult children.
For them, I thought, as I opened
the side door and put the rope in the garbage.
In my dreams, those tiny knots.

Suffering

I wish I could have healed your skin
in the lotion of my bed.

I would have wiped your body liquid,
rubbed the places that needed turning
but you're dead and there's nothing

I can do to hold your body here,
no crab apples thrown at your back
bedroom window, nothing can steal you
from the urn that holds
the ashes of your embers.

You suffered beyond what a body can bear,
remember you a tree trunk about to fall
into the riverbed when I called you
away from the rooster's crow,
letting you sleep until noon, padding your pockets
with rent and good weather.

When I donate summer clothes, I do it for you.
When I give the old man on the street money
for his jazz, I do it for you.
When I ask my orphaned friend for Thanksgiving,
I do it for you. Your life surrendered its clutching

held against the clever sea.
You were washed away without return.
I dig a hole in the ground, say, "This is for you,"
Friends think I'll plant daffodils, the color of sun.
But, that's not it. I want a scar I can see.

Hereafter

You could be swinging on a hammock
nipping a pear, your feet naked
to the balmy coast, aware that you were directed to this.
You could have nothing to fear. Your death

and its pain over. Worry ceased. Loved ones left
to care for each other. Look at what you're offered —
the ripe summer opening its nectar and its rose
to you, the valley winds

blowing its reminder of nesting, that expanse of white
things: birds, the bear, cousins of egrets.
Why shouldn't you be the breeze over Barcelona
enjoying the clay land and quiet

outskirts, the solitude you longed for without the loneliness.

Language Is

A rope of glass—delicate and dangerous—

I'm the new stranger in town, flashes the wind's skin.

I'm leaving, tosses the river of air.

Think of it this way, words skid over the stillborn silence:

an arrow pierces the red morning

as the raven wakes free.

Betoken Broken

you go dressed up
to your neighbor's wedding
hoping to have a small, pleasant time

only to hear the bearded man went off with the groom
the bride beguiled by her maid of honor's sister
doesn't seem to care
disappears down the winding stair

the bridesmaids stand quiet for a minute
taking stock, then take each other to the movies
the benumbed minister takes off his glasses
remembers wanting to be a railroad engineer

the guests are left holding a belief
in wedding cakes and God in one hand
a gift in the other

you dance trying to remember
where did you put the receipt

Crunch

Nursing dogs with long rows of swollen mammary glands
make me think of sextuplets,
squeezing out all those babies.
How distasteful!

My God, I'm on the side of women, any woman,
why shouldn't I share nature and desire
happily with any new mother?
After all, I'm a mother too.

Of one child. Barely one. Premature.
The doctor said I could take him home
even though he wasn't 5 pounds
because I was a college graduate,
forcing me to cry out, No, No,
I've never been left with a baby before.
No breast feeding there. A lazy sucker,
the nurses called him.

I heard my son tell his girlfriend
all children are breast-fed for a year.
I stopped singing,
then started up quickly
so he wouldn't notice and ask.
He's 27 and living at home,
says he's moving in with Wanda soon.
Wanda loves him so much
she comes to stay
a couple nights a week.

He came to live here for a month
two years ago.
I had a sofa to offer and hot meals.

Then my lover died
and I went walking for cookies
late each night, returned home
to watch crime forensics,
the worst happening first, then the solving.

I felt like a stepped-on snail with
shell and flesh smashed.

I didn't work much.

My son started to share the rent with me

and the couch with Wanda.

He says he wants to focus on himself more.

Wanda says he's the best mother she's ever had.

Together

My hair turns gray
but grows curlier, thicker.
Her hair thins and yellows.
It's something we don't discuss.
We sit on the bench in the sun.

Time spreads our hips.
We spread our feet a bit for ease.
We wear comfortable shoes
and double socks for warmth.

We were friends when our children
broke their ankles turning somersaults
on yellow flowered hillsides.

We were together when as adult children
they came home disappointed
and no one loved them like their momma did
and no one eased their way.
Life tore at them and caught them unprepared.
We helped each other help them out again
to heartache, love and revved up cars
so we could enjoy this sun.

She stretches her back
and pushes out her stomach.
I remember my back and yawn and stretch with her.

I sit and think of pine trees
and green grass. She dreams peppermint.
Our hormones bounce. We get hot flashes.
We let our tummies go. We don't care.
We are round like water-smoothed stones.

We use babushkas to cover our heads
from the wind and sing when silver breezes come.

We smile. We rock. We're together.
We're changing seasons, my friend, this sun.

A Song

There's a muscle I can't get back. It's not the stomach
my child's birth took, or the place caved in from the years
my lap was a warm bowl. No. I lie here trying to be honest,

curling around your body, your skin warming my life
wanting to be truthful, explain the place in me
I can't reach, an old trunk needing to be unpacked.

I read you poems of loving a woman who mistook me
for a robber, how she collected everything back,
the winter garden pulled.

You tell me you were once in a car wreck,
there was no place your body didn't hit—
windows, chrome handles, ceilings, locked door—
the purple bruises lasting all that year.

New Horizons

The sky opens and lightning runs the sky,
rain falls as tiny puffs on the leaf
of earth's wrinkled skin. This is heaven,
this round bubble of silence, my face
against this window. Never has there been
so much silence, such rest in deep corridors.
How long I've needed this.

When change comes to waken me,
it is the cloak of butterfly skin:
speckled velvet, tiger fur, leopard.
These butterflies wave their wings
against the glass as if to ask me
to come back to earth
live in the delicate storm of flesh again.

To Be Yourself

We are a knot in the daisy chain that starts with the first bone
of a woman who sighs forth the earth
and all the sparrow's singing, the legacy of toil
and measured patience that lives in trees
and waits for spring without a cry.

At the edge of the river deep, the banks
moist with our earth body, the meadows
spring with grasses blazed with sun
as the water flows from the high mountains
of birth to the conclusion of cascading dust—
a fury, then a quiet.

The cord that once held us to the mother who
tended us—or didn't—those first years,
forms a question, that now finds liberation
like an extra string on a harp, music
that thrills beyond the composer's hand to voice its own.

.

Shelter

We sleep between trees in the rain
without walls or windows.

Feet twine on this cold night;
touch unfreezes the root.
Tonight we become anchor to each other,

your hand brushing back my hair,
breath passing from you to me, me to you.
Now the question in my throat.

What Rages

Almost everything I know lifts itself up to light.

That was the beginning of noticing my differences and my doubt.

I watch kittens climb to rooftops for winter's sun,
morning glories open in the dew of dawn.
Families rooted down but winding themselves
around a stake like vines to climb higher.

But my fascination was in the dark
where sacks filled with rage were stored.

My suffering began to ease
when I opened the rain cellar door,
let the living thing crawl out.

Life, And...

The night was long and days shone their surface
full of sunlight and rushing clocks.

Sliced with love's swords, we kept time in fast motion,
carried our wounds from one to the other, different names
and different faces. When dawn came too early,
we turned over and changed employment.
When night darkened past midnight, it was
the ink on the paper that made us flee.

Those days of fickleness and recklessness
held knots of friendships and scars
healed by soft hands of the very people
we were trying to escape. It makes no sense,
liking the music of yesterday better than we did back then,
looking back at wildness as a treasure. Yet from it came truth
finally honored as more than a crusade's slogan,
as a way of life lived upon a sand that stays.

We left independence on the rough-grained step
and a move toward history's new height
of plunder and delight and found
a restfulness in love and home and more
than that, an order; order can be the very thing
love relies on to carve into the skin an imprint
so when the night comes when one must nurse—
while one is freed—it is the set of things that allows
us to say, I've been happy in the world with you.

A Silence Beyond

Harvesting language, mouth fills
with metaphor and blood,
the alphabet, a roadmap spilling

words, cat's got your tongue, alone
in what you know, don't know,

dirty waters, the side of a canal,
a walk through Amsterdam,
flocks of hooded children in pouring rain,
nuns running as dark angels
holding birds close to their bodies
before a spread of wing.

No one knows where you are
and you are alone and fine,
a silence beyond brokenness.

Lamps tip and sheets rumple,
a raven's call to midnight,
revved up cars and
cowboy boots, doors banging,
love's got its eyes on you,

name as beloved, a feed
of education and luck,
reading in overstuffed chairs,
the only sound the click of furnace.

Miscarriage and stillborn,

unlit candles hold a time out of time,
retreating potential—
kindness never wasted, a mercy.

Soft parts of skin where a child first held on,
a toddler gnawing at a carrot;
shining, wide at dawn, the sweep of rain,
a coming sun.

It is never too late to want the world.

About the Author



Janell Moon won the National Salt Hill Prize, the Whiskey Hill Award, and the National Stonewall Prize awarded by Chestnut Hills Press. She has also won awards in the Georgia State University Randall Jared Award, the Billie Murray Denny Poetry Award, The Red Rock Review Prize, The Villa Montalvo Poetry Prize, the Gertrude Award, Comstock Poetry Award, and the

Poet Lore Award among others. She is a reader for the Bay Area Poets for Peace Project and has been published in many literary journals including *Americas*, *Runes*, *Calyz*, and the *Michigan Review*.

She is the author of *Stirring the Waters: Writing to Find Your Spirit* (Tuttle) nominated for the NAPRA Nautilus Award as one of the five best spirituality books of 2002, and *The Wise Earth Speaks to Your Spirit* (RedWheel/Weiser) which was voted one of the best spiritual books of 2004 by *Spirituality and Health Magazine*. She is also the author of *The Prayer Box* (RedWheel/Weiser), and *How to Pray Without Being Religious* (Thorsons Element UK), a division of HarperCollins.

She is a graduate of Ohio University in Athens, Ohio, and is a San Francisco bay area counselor and hypnotherapist in private practice and a writing teacher at bay area community colleges.

The author gratefully accepts poetry comments at janellmoon@aol.com.

Janell Moon's collection of poetry travels across a broad landscape on fluid language and surprising combinations. From how a mother provokes to the sweet memory of a forbidden nude nighttime swim, to the fantasy of a wedding gone homoerotically awry, each poem is a piquant story seen through the window as the world flashes by. Moon's skill is evoking such a wide array of feelings—anxiety, desire, nostalgia, bemusement—it is our own lives flashing before us.

—Jewelle Gómez,
author of *The Gilda Stories*

Janell Moon's poems are crammed with a lifetime of everyday yearning, secret little female intimacies and personal history that positively rumbles with quiet power. This poetry is alive and electric.

—Michelle Tea,
author of *Rose of No Man's Land*

In these poems celebrating Janell Moon's brimming life, we meet many ordinary, unique, loved people: her grandma who makes corsets for movie stars (Judy Garland, Loretta Young), her sister, dressed as her "favorite striped shorts" on the laundry line, Janell herself as a young girl who "held her silence," Janell as a wife whose "passion was covered with the heel of America's secrets." Because they detail the necessity of that secrecy, these poems are political as well as personal. They are lyrical and sweet and honest. Though they chronicle her life, they succeed as poems, intense and spare, rich in their psychological understanding, not burdened with plodding analysis. I like a lot her found poem from a KQED broadcast, Janell Moon grabs poetry wherever she finds it.

—Phyllis Koestenbaum,
author of *Doris Day and Kitschy Melodies*



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